

THE CHAPLAIN AS A LISTENER:
"Obstacles and Opportunities"

by
WALTER C TUCKER
Chaplain C-22

A Research Paper
for
USACHCS C-22

Submitted to:

CH(LTC) Ermine Todd
Primary Instructor

Prepared by:

CH Walter C Tucker

Date Submitted:

15 January 1975

THE CHAPLAIN AS A LISTENER:
"Obstacles and Opportunities"

OUTLINE

INTRODUCTION

I. OBSTACLES

1. Tradition as a speaker
2. Counseling ministry is secondary
3. Viewed as judgmental
4. For church folk only

II. PREREQUISITES TO LISTENING

1. Rapport
2. Empathy

III. CREATIVE LISTENING

1. Directive listening
2. Supportive listening
3. Reassurance listening

CONCLUSION

THE CHAPLAIN AS A LISTENER:
"Obstacles and Opportunities"

There is a familiar verse in the New Testament which says, "Confess, therefore, your sins one to another....and then you will be healed." There is a saying, this one of uncertain origin, which says, "Confession is good for the soul."

Both of the above statements indicate that somebody needs to talk to somebody. They also imply that someone needs to hear. This is what I want to concentrate on in this paper. Being heard! I will dwell briefly on some of the obstacles the chaplain faces in getting the opportunity to listen, but the main thrust will be the extreme importance of real listening. Counselors hear people say words but they do not always hear what they say in those words.

The minister (the titles "chaplain" and "minister" will be used innerchangably) is a counselor, and as such, a listener. This position has not always been granted him without reluctance and criticism. The criticism ranges from the often heard: "I can't talk to a preacher!" to the thought provoking words of Dr. Leslie Weatherhead:

"I am convinced that in many situations the professional ecclesiastic is not a suitable person to hear a confession. I should vote for the penitent's right to choose his confessor."¹

I. OBSTACLES

When the minister hangs out his shingle, "Counseling Done Here," he does it in the face of many obstacles. Let it be understood they are not insurmountable obstacles, nor are they ones placed there by the minister himself. But they are real and

¹Leslie D. Weatherhead, Prescription for Anxiety (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956), p. 63.

must be overcome or at least confronted if the person off the street seeks his guidance.

The first obstacle is that traditionally the minister is a speaker. He doesn't hear but expects others to hear. In a facetious little book entitled Some Preachers Do, the advice to a young ministerial student is, "let them know that you are the spokesman, the silver tongue orator. If they don't believe it then tell them every day."² Of course the statement is tongue-in-cheek, as is the entire book. Tradition, as often viewed by the laity, would have it rooted in truth.

Psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and social workers have talked of listening. The ancient church tried to make it a Sacrament. Since the Reformation not much was said about the art until very recent times. The clergy have spoken of themselves as "called to preach," by which they have meant proclaiming the gospel, pointing the way. Proclaiming is preacher centered while listening is parishoner centered. The minister does not feel he has been "called" to listen.

I do not mean to imply that preachers are ego-centered orators who are their own favorite audiences, nor that many who are steeped in the art of one-sided communication are incapable of change, nor that many have not already changed. A great many have mastered the art of listening and have developed the great therapeutic value of the understanding ear. This obstacle has always been the way the potential counselee viewed the chaplain. To him he has been a speaker, not a listener.

²Bertie C. Bays, Some Preachers Do (Chicago: Judson Press, 1953), p. 16.

A second obstacle to listening is the tendency to consider all of counseling as secondary. This leads to impatience and poor listening techniques. The counseling role becomes an orphan in the family of ministerial tasks, falling somewhere in the midst of studying, christening children, visiting the sick, performing weddings, and burying the dead. If counseling is an orphan, then meaningful listening is an unwanted child, maybe even an illegitimate one.

If the counseling process is viewed as secondary then advice will come too quickly in an effort to rush the session and return to primary things. There may be the temptation to give a religious solution to a non-religious problem, and that too quickly. Many a person has been advised to pray or go to church, when what he needed the most was someone to hear him. He was crying out for someone to listen, but his anxiety was met with words that overpowered him rather than with empathic hearing to strengthen him. The client cannot "talk it out" unless someone stays around to hear him out. Rollo May feels the necessity for this. The client must be allowed to talk with very little talk from the chaplain. "If the counselee does not do at least two-thirds of the talking in a given hour, something is wrong with the procedure."³

There is a third obstacle which also deals with the way the minister is viewed. This is the traditional belief that he is a judgmental person. Even in this enlightened day, to a great many layman the preacher is a sort of "hired sin-hater," blasting sin and sinners and not really caring about hearing.

³Rollo May, The Art of Counseling (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1939), p. 143.

Tradition has placed the minister in that precarious position. It has not always been wrong. Thankfully, neither has it always been right. If one has passed judgment it is quite safe to assume that very little listening has occurred. In speaking with a young woman who had been through a session steeped in moral judgments and value systems she told me, "I didn't have to be told I had been wrong. I knew I had been wrong. I feel worse now than ever. I die a little every day because of what I know about me. Man, he didn't have to tell me. I know!"

The counselor with concern and the well tuned listening ear must be able to say by his attitude if not his words, "neither do I condemn thee." The minister has the admonition of "judge not" ever before him. He may be able to preach it to the urgings of a large congregation and bring fiery wrath on those who pass judgment on their neighbors, but it is precisely the religious counselor who has traditionally found it the most difficult not to condemn. Jung holds that the reason people hesitate to confess to their minister, but go to a psychiatrist instead, is their fear that the minister will put them down for the act they have confessed.⁴ Wayne Oates draws a parallel between the listener who can't listen and the three advisers who came to the aid of Job. Job wanted someone to hear his pleadings. He had lost so much and had so many things to say. All three allowed him to speak but they did not hear him. They only judged.⁵ They were not the last to be viewed this way.

⁴C. G. Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1933), p. 270.

⁵Wayne E. Oates, When Religion Gets Sick (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970), p. 156.

The last obstacle I shall mention is one of the most serious ones for it is the one which stands most in the way of the non-church affiliated people. This is the thought that the minister is available to church folk only. Granted, this obstacle is not as difficult with the chaplain in the military as it is with the civilian counterparts. The person with a problem - that is the person off the street - has a hard time talking to the minister, or even seeking him out to begin with. This is logical because he has no one he can call "my minister." A verse in the Bible says, "How shall they hear except the preacher be sent." Conversely and paraphrased we could say, "How shall the preacher hear except they feel free to tell him."

These are a few of the more obvious obstacles. There are some the chaplain will never have the opportunity to hear. On the other hand there are multitudes he will be able to hear, more in fact than he can possibly handle. It is on this aspect of counseling - the listening aspect - that the paper will now center.

II. NECESSARY PREREQUISITES TO GOOD LISTENING

1. Rapport.

Unless rapport is established and the "vibrations are right" a session is hampered, if not dead. Establishment of rapport is one of the most acceptable traits of client-centered therapy. In the session the chaplain cares and gives trust. His main function is to provide an atmosphere in which the client feels free to explore himself, to acquire understanding of himself, and begin to reorganize what has gone on before. By careful listening and meaningful response and reflection he needs to encourage the

the person before him to be more fully himself.⁶

2. Empathy.

The element I consider most important as a prerequisite to listening is empathy. It is most difficult to have the former without the latter. To be able to say with complete honesty, "I know how you feel," is very desirable. This is part of what Carl Rogers calls Positive Regard. Patterson thinks of empathy as:

"...the state of perceiving the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy, and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto, as if one were the other person, but without ever losing the 'as if' condition."

Though I hesitate to relate personal illustrations I feel it is necessary to give one here. It deals with empathy.

A young soldier, 18 years of age, came to my office. He wanted to talk about his drug problems. He approached in a hesitant manner, talked about drugs for a few minutes, then quickly moved to another subject which was deeper and more disturbing. He began to relate some things from his childhood. It was a childhood which had left him with disappointment, regret, and a feeling of rejection.

While this young man talked I sat perfectly relaxed and met his eyes with mine. There was no tenseness, but a natural visual exchange. Soon I was so taken by what he was saying that I became unaware of anything except the frightened countenance, the trembling voice, and the intense drama he was unfolding. He told how his father had forced him to surrender his wallet on his first leave

⁶Robert A. Harper, Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1959), p. 83.

⁷C. H. Patterson, Theories of Counseling and Psychotherapy (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers. 1966), p. 409.

so that he might inspect it for drugs. He told how his father and step-mother had beaten him with thick leather straps when he was in his early teens. Somehow I felt the pain caused by those straps, and somehow I could hear the voice of the step-mother as she screamed to him; "No good!" "Juvenile jail bait!" "Stupid creep!" I could feel the loneliness of being forced to leave home and make it alone during early high school days. It was a feeling that hurt.

Then he entered the army as an alternative to jail. There he found very few friends. He wanted to find friends but could not do so. The feeling of inferiority and rejection he had developed did not disappear in the army. Once again I had the feeling of personal involvement as I heard his voice mimic his superiors: "Dud!" "Potthead!" "Weak sister!"

At last he related a firm desire to somehow make it work, to make it against all the odds which were before him. I had a feeling of exhilaration and felt myself inwardly saying, "Sure I can do it!" Had I spoken I feel my voice would have displayed the same hesitant, wavering quality as his. At this point we had reached the point which Rollo May calls psychic unity. I would rather call it empathy. It is the feeling, or the thinking of one personality into another until some state of identification is achieved. In this identification real understanding between people can take place. In this identification one can almost say, "I really do know how you feel!"

III. CREATIVE LISTENING

The first principle of the physician is: Do No Harm! That ought to be a guiding principle for the chaplain also. He, like

the doctor, must work as best he can with the present understanding of the task. At the same time he must strive to increase knowledge and understanding. Creative listening can help in achieving these. There are several forms of listening to be considered here.

1. Directive Listening.

Directive listening is characterized by the use of occasional comments by the counselor. At times directive listening can make good use of short questions. The surgeon's exploratory scalpel is the counselor's question. Both are dangerous if used in the wrong way and in the wrong place. The most frequent mistake in the use of questions is asking them too fast. In proper perspective they can be useful. Used in rapid-fire order, for the purpose of getting answers to minor questions, they are unforgivable. The same purpose of "keeping on track" can usually be gained by a nod of the head, a smile, a restatement, or another non-verbal sign to indicate to the client that you are there all the way. If the client is talking well audible comments to him may not be necessary at all.

2. Supportive Listening.

Supportive listening is what Russell Dicks calls passive listening,⁸ and what Kemp refers to as the "true meaning of acceptance."⁹

The term implies exactly what the chaplain does for his counselee: He emotionally supports him as he listens. He centers

⁸Russell L. Dicks, Pastoral Work and Personal Counseling (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1960), p. 47.

⁹C. Gratton Kemp, Foundations of Group Counseling (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970), p. 96.

attention upon the client's thoughts and needs, and not upon something else, such as himself, or the church, or God. If the counselee should bring in these subjects they can be discussed, but the counselor does not bring them into the conversation when there is no indication the counselee has thought of them lately and unless they are pertinent to the immediate topic. Russell Dicks writes:

"I heard of a minister who announced to his congregation that he would talk only about religion when he called on them or they on him."¹⁰

In my view this minister had completely missed the point. If the minister insists on setting the rules then supportive listening can hardly take place. If such listening is to be accomplished then all the barriers and preconceptions must be down.

A chaplain being passive in a counseling session does not mean he puts himself in a relaxing trance. Nor does it mean "demonstrating the ability to outstare the client."¹¹ It means being alert. It means nodding the head as if to say "go on." It means looking at the client and looking away. It means waiting and hoping. It means relaxing so as not to block the story through resistance, prejudice, and preconceived ideas. It means believing that good can come out of evil and hope out of suffering.

3. Reassurance Listening.

This stage of listening response is the most easily given, but it is also the most dangerous. It, like a gun, ought never be drawn unless there is a worthy target. "You can do it,"

¹⁰Dicks, op. cit., 47.

¹¹Seward Hiltner, The Christian Shepherd (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959), p. 108.

is a very tough thing to say to someone who has never been able to do it.

Reassurance listening is a verbalized statement by the counselor. It is probably the least effective and the most used, especially by clergymen. I think this is true because the clergyman is most reluctant to let the client leave feeling bad. He wants him to leave feeling good, so the clergyman expresses an opinion that the problem will work itself out. This may be part of the obstacles discussed earlier, the fact that the minister has a tradition of speaking rather than listening, so he feels it simply unproductive to say nothing at all.

A person will not have courage (except maybe false courage) because the chaplain tells him to have it. But a person may develop some natural courage if someone listens to him, has interest in him, and gives real undergirding to him. If his courage comes as a result of the chaplain's need to say something to keep from saying nothing, then a friendly arm on the shoulder would be better than a verbalized: "I have faith this will not throw you."

CONCLUSION:

No doubt every chaplain has had at least one experience where a client left his presence after a session with his spirits lifted, his voice cheery, his step springy. As he departed there was a grateful look on his face. He thanked the chaplain and said, "you have helped me so much!" The chaplain was happy too, but was silently asking himself: "What did I do? I didn't speak a word!" He listened. That was what he did. He listened well. Quite often that speaks louder and lasts longer than many words.

Real listening is an art. I think it is an art which can be

learned. If the art is not learned then a counselor, in my opinion, can never be as helpful as he might be. He must learn to listen with a purpose, with love, and with complete concern for the person before him. He would do well to remember the words of one writer: "Listening is present in counseling, but not all listening is counseling."¹² For listening to be counseling the obstacles must go. If they go then opportunities for a greater amount of good can take their places.

¹²Bruce Shertzer and Shelly Stone, Fundamentals of Counseling (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), p. 25.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bays, Bertie C., Some Preachers Do. Chicago: Judson Press, 1953.
- Dicks, Russell L., Pastoral Work and Personal Counseling.
New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960.
- Harper, Robert A., Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy.
Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1959.
- Hiltner, Seward, The Christian Shepherd. New York: Abingdon Press, 1959.
- Jung, C. G., Modern Man in Search of a Soul. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1933.
- Kemp, C. Gratton, Foundations of Group Counseling. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970.
- May, Rollo, The Art of Counseling. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1939.
- Oates, Wayne E., When Religion Gets Sick. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970.
- Patterson, C. H., Theories of Counseling and Psychotherapy.
New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1966.
- Shertzer, Bruce and Shelley C. Stone, Fundamentals of Counseling.
New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968.
- Weatherhead, Leslie D., Prescription for Anxiety. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956.